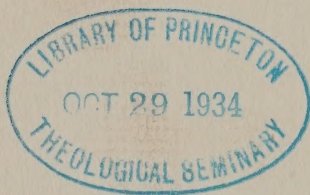


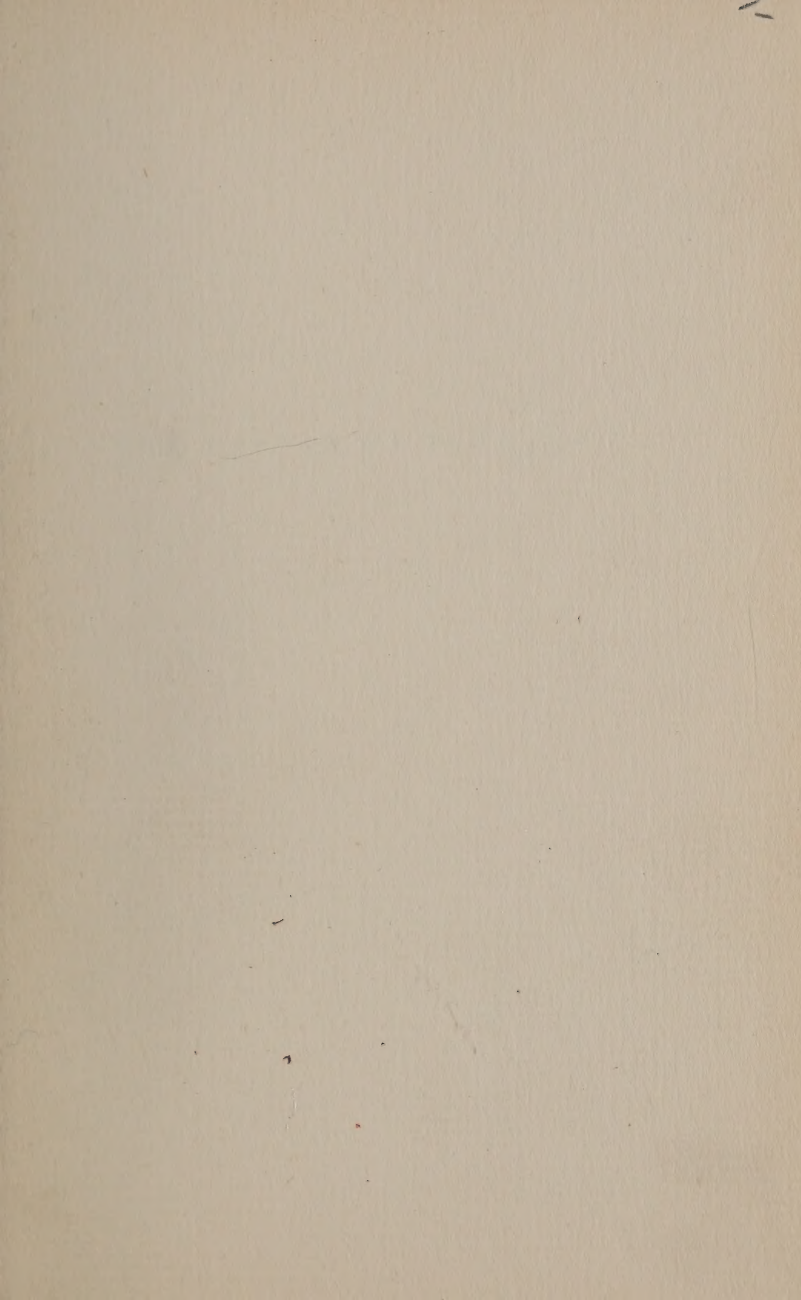


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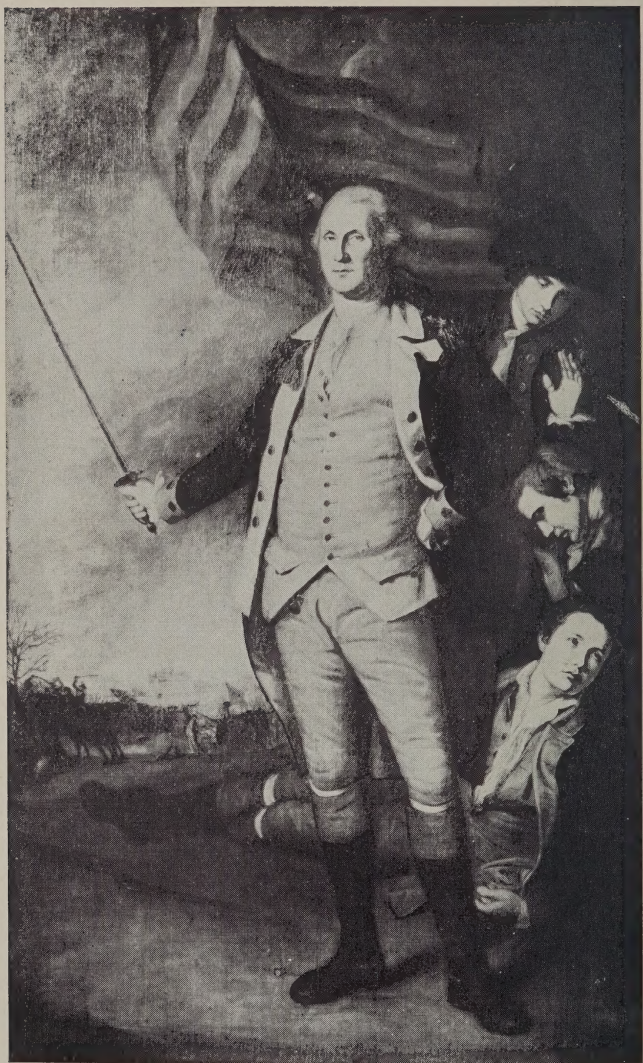


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THE BATTLE OF TRENTON

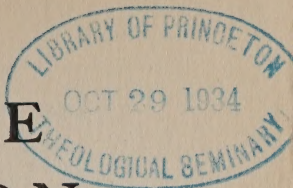


The Princeton Portrait of Washington, by Peale

✓
The BATTLE
OF TRENTON

INCLUDING
ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

✓ BY
H. BORTON BUTCHER, P.H.D.



1934
PRINCETON
PRINCETON . UNIVERSITY . PRESS

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PRINTED AT THE PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY, U. S. A.

PREFACE

THE battle of Trenton was a feat of leadership such as is rarely to be found. It wrote indelibly on the great ledger of the world the name of Washington.

This little book presents a lucid and, at the same time, a succinct account of the event together with an exposition of the circumstances which made the battle the turning point of the Revolutionary War. Since the American cause was at its lowest ebb before the famous crossing of the Delaware River was made, the situation from which the tide of fortune turned to flood toward success again is of the greatest interest and importance. Therefore the clue to the real significance of the battle is supplied by the background, and so this narrative gives particular attention to it. Above all the attendant difficulties, however, looms the impressive figure of the determined, patient, able, and dependable Father of His Country.

In order to make the monograph the more definite, two maps have been prepared to accompany the narrative. One of these is a sketch of the plan of the town at the time of the battle; the other shows part of the present city over which the position of the battle lines has been drawn.

The frontispiece is from a portrait belonging to Princeton University, painted by Charles Willson Peale commemorating the battle of Princeton. Not only is it one of the most accurate of the pictures of Washington but the one most closely associated with the New Jersey campaign. The dying General Mercer, attended by a surgeon, is shown at the right. Mercer was fifty-six; his son probably posed for the picture. The other figure does not look unlike the artist himself who, as an officer in Washington's army, took part in the battles of Trenton and Princeton. In the background the battle is going on around Nassau Hall.

There seems to be room for a new survey of the battle of Trenton. Existing accounts, which describe the battle in any detail, have a tendency to take a myopic view and to present a tableau, making the event appear

as a rock dredged from its natural place in the stream of history. In the following pages will be found a treatment that strives to be at once readable, broadly comprehensive, and dependable. Every statement made in this account can be supported by citations to the records of witnesses.

H.B.B.

I cannot but remember the place New Jersey holds in the early history of our country. I remember that in the Revolutionary struggle none had more of its battle fields. I remember reading, in my youth, a small book—*The Life of Washington*—and of his struggles none fixed itself on my mind so indelibly, as the crossing of the Delaware preceding the battle of Trenton. I remember that these great struggles were made for some object. I am exceedingly anxious that the object they fought for—liberty, and the Union and Constitution they formed—shall be perpetual.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN:

*to the New Jersey Senate
on February 21, 1861, at a
reception for the President-
elect in the State House in
Trenton.*

CHAPTER I

THE CIRCUMSTANCES

“The worthy fellow is our general:

He is the rock, the oak not to be wind-shaken.”

SHAKESPEARE, *Coriolanus*

THAT George Washington was the best man for the office of Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army was certainly not apparent to all during the early years of the Revolutionary War. He had been chosen for this high command as a Virginian to bring the Old Dominion, and all the other colonies, to the support of the open conflict with the Mother Country that had been started in Massachusetts by the colonials of that province. The choice, as he himself modestly said, was the result of “the partiality of Congress joined to a political motive.” But during the year 1776, while the current of the conflict ran strongly counter to the American cause, an increasing number of his compatriots honestly believed him incompetent. After

the battle of Trenton, however, only those who had selfish ambitions to serve remained among his detractors. In one brief hour of fighting Washington achieved lasting fame.

The event was the crisis of the struggle for independence. The explanation of the grand importance of the strategy of crossing the Delaware River in the darkness of a stormy, winter night to make a surprise attack on the German soldiers, who were then in occupation of the town of Trenton, can be gained by considering the military campaign leading to the doggedly courageous attempt. The approach to the crucial conflict can best be made, as the American army made it, across New Jersey from New York. The preliminaries, which give the circumstances of the American cause at the end of the year 1776, show clearly that the drift of the tide of war against Washington and his companions threatened to carry them over the brink of failure into the abyss of ruin. It is for this reason that the stratagem which turned the tide was more important than the capture of one thousand men and six cannon would otherwise have been.

The introduction to Washington's famous crossing of the Delaware might well begin with the Declaration of Independence, almost six months before that eventful night. When the celebrated piece of parchment was signed, the American army of 20,000 rather raw recruits occupied New York, and, at the same time, during that July and August, while the number of signatures on the document in the State House in Philadelphia was increasing, General Sir William Howe collected his forces on Staten Island. On August 12, the first contingent of 8,397 Hessian soldiers arrived in America and reported to the British commander, bringing the total of the enemy forces to 30,000 men. Thus strengthened, Howe overwhelmed the Americans in the battle of Long Island on August 27, and succeeded in capturing Generals Sullivan and Stirling together with 1,100 men. On September 16, the British occupied the City of New York coming into battle with the Continentals at Harlem Heights where, although the King's forces were checked, the armies faced each other for four weeks. The engagement at White Plains took place on October 28 to 31, end-

ing without the dislodgement of the Continental Army.

From this time until the end of the year, the American fortunes sank desperately until Tory New York ridiculed Washington with his "ragamuffin army"—called him a genius at running away. Two weeks after the battle of White Plains, a crushing attack was sent against Fort Washington in upper Manhattan (where the new suspension bridge crosses the Hudson and where the work of restoring the fort is about completed) resulting in the capture of the fort and two thousand men. A few days thereafter, on November 20, Fort Lee, on the palisades of New Jersey, was surprised, but, although the position was captured, General Greene managed to escape with his garrison.

Then, at the outset of the Fabian retreat across the Jerseys, Washington expected to be able to make a stand at the Hackensack River or at Newark and again at New Brunswick. But, instead of being reenforced by the militia of the State, his ranks were depleted by desertions and by the expiration of enlistments. General Charles Lee, whom he had left at White Plains with

7,000 men, did not heed the repeated orders that were sent, telling him to bring his command to New Jersey. "Cruelly disappointed" by the disaffection on all sides, the Commander-in-Chief wrote to his brother: "If every nerve is not strained to recruit a new army, I think the game is pretty nearly up."

Presenting the picture as it did appear, one must say that it was harvest time in a rural section, a poor time to join what looked like a lost cause. Furthermore, while the American army was dwindling, the King's was increasing. The second quota of Hessians to the number of about 4,000 had arrived in October, and before the end of the year there were 17,000 German soldiers in the country. The success of the English in New York, together with their increasingly superior military strength, prompted the "King's Commissioners for Restoring Peace to His Majesty's Colonies and Plantations in North America" to issue a proclamation calling upon those who had opposed the royal government "to desist and cease from all such treasonable actings and doings." Complete amnesty was offered to those who would swear allegiance to George III within

sixty days from the date, November 30, 1776. To this oath a disheartening number of "colonists" who had taken some active part in the movement, thinking that the outcome of the struggle was no longer in doubt, scrambled to subscribe. "Bad as our prospects are," wrote Washington to Robert Morris, "I should not have the least doubt of success in the end, did not the late treachery and defection of those who stood foremost in the opposition, while fortune smiled upon us, make me fearful." Nearly three thousand took the oath of allegiance in accordance with the British proclamation, including one of those who had signed the Declaration of Independence.

Such was the slough of despondency into which the national spirit had come as the dwindling army of patriots retreated the whole distance across New Jersey. The rear guard of the retreating forces was ferried over the Delaware River from Trenton on December 8, as the British columns marched into town with pomp and circumstance—that is, with music. Howe soon arrived on the banks of the Delaware to find that all the boats for twenty miles up and down the

river were on the Pennsylvania side, well guarded.

When the news of these movements reached Philadelphia, the people were, in the words of a member of the Continental Congress, "horridly frightened." Business was suspended and the men gathered at the coffeehouse on Second Street to hear the latest news. Another member of Congress, in a letter describing the situation in this, the largest city in America, said: "the troops belonging to the 'Flying Camp,' whose term of enlistment had expired, left the general in whole brigades . . . so that the city is filled with returning soldiers, though never more needed in the field. General Mifflin harangued a great number, perhaps six or seven hundred of them, in the State House yard yesterday with success, and it is expected, a great part will return for a month."

General Putnam was put in charge of the defense of the city under the direction and cooperation of the Council of Safety headed by Thomas Wharton, Jr. In the emergency Congress recommended to the States the appointment of a "Day of solemn fasting and humiliation to implore the Almighty

God for the forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks, and to beg the countenance and assistance of His Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war." On the next day after the adoption of this measure, Congress adjourned to Baltimore. On the following day General Lee, who had at last brought his army into northern New Jersey, was captured in a tavern several miles from his command.

The situation in New Jersey at the time is well illustrated by the experience of Richard Stockton of Princeton and John Hart of Hopewell, Signers of the Declaration of Independence. The former, just after returning from Ticonderoga whither he had gone with George Clymer on a mission for Congress, was captured on November 30, by some Tories of Monmouth County where he was visiting. Being delivered over to the British in New York, he was held a prisoner there while the enemy occupied Princeton and pillaged his home. The latter at the age of sixty-five was an old man in comparison with the young, hot enthusiasts of the national movement; only Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island and

Benjamin Franklin among the Signers were his seniors. He had been a judge of the common pleas court and was then the speaker of the New Jersey Assembly as well as a member of the Continental Congress. Nevertheless his property was plundered, and he had to become a fugitive hiding himself on Sourland Mountain because he was one of the fifty-six who had declared this land a nation of free and sovereign people. It is said, perhaps with some degree of exaggeration, that, during the occupation of his county, Hart did not dare to sleep for two consecutive nights in the same house or barn.

That the dark days of the campaign of 1776 were the inspiration, in part at least, for one of Rudyard Kipling's poems may not be generally known. The life of Washington, especially his behavior in this crisis, so impressed Kipling that he enlarged upon the qualities of patience and fortitude, which were so outstanding in that hero of America, to make the magnificent paragon described in the poem *IF*. Of the many who know this poem, word for word, few are aware that Kipling had in mind the gloomy but, in his-

tory, glorious period of the retreat across New Jersey when he wrote it.

Returning to the baffling human problem confronting the American commander, we find that, on December 22, an argument for desperate action was sent to his chief by the ever-loyal adjutant-general, Colonel Joseph Reed. After reporting that Colonel Samuel Griffin with 600 men had drawn the attention of the enemy in Bordentown to Mount Holly, he concluded a rather long discourse in these words:

Something must be attempted before the sixty days expire which the commissioners have allowed, for, however many affect to despise it, it is evident that a very serious attention is paid to it, and I am confident that unless some more favorable appearance attends our arms and cause before that time, a very large number of militia officers here will follow the example of those of Jersey and take benefit from it. I will not disguise my own sentiments, that our cause is desperate and hopeless if we do not take the opportunity of the collection of troops at present, to strike some stroke. Our affairs are hastening fast to ruin if we do not retrieve them by some happy event. Delay with us is equal to total defeat Pardon the freedom I have used. The love of my country, a wife and four children in the enemy's hands, the respect and attachment I have to you,

the ruin and poverty that must attend me and thousands of others, will plead my excuse for so much freedom.

In reply Washington gave directions for the cooperation of the Bristol detachment in the thrust at the Hessians which, probably, he had already under consideration before Colonel Reed's letter was received. This return dispatch was directed to Colonel Reed or in his absence to Colonel Cadwalader only, and said, in part: "Our numbers, sorry am I to say, being less than I had any conception of, but necessity, dire necessity, will, nay must, justify an attack."

There is another side to the picture; although it is not a really bright side, there are a few radiant spots of encouragement to be seen. For one thing that quality of frontier determination, for which America has become famous and of which the European opponents took no notice, animated the remaining troops. Furthermore, the capture of Charles Lee resulted in the prompt reenforcement of the army across the Delaware since John Sullivan, who was second in command of the detachment, hastened to join Washington. The other bright spot to be

mentioned is quite important although it has often been slighted in accounts of the Revolution. It was the appearance of an inspiring piece of eloquence, one of the most effective exhortations in all history, "The American Crisis" by the author of *Common Sense* (Thomas Paine). Do not these sentences ring?

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph 'Tis surprising to see how rapidly a panic will run through a country. All the nations and ages have been subject to them. Britain has trembled like an ague at the report of a French fleet of flat-bottomed boats Yet panics, in some cases, have their uses; they produce so much good as hurt. Their duration is always short Up and help us; lay your shoulder to the wheel; the heart that feels not now, is dead.

The "Crisis" was published in the *Pennsylvania Journal* exactly one week before the event for which it was an important part of the preparation. It appeared in pamphlet form on December 23, and it was read to

each unit of the army by Washington's order. Both for its action on the morale of the army and for its heartening influence on the civilian population, no more effective moment in the whole Revolution could have been selected for the publication of this blast from the pen of Tom Paine. When it reached England, as it did very quickly, a copy was officially burned by the hangman. In this timely work Paine gave to a momentous moment the stimulation of the bugle call and drum beat to attack. "These are the times that try men's souls," became the battle cry of the charge on December 26. A recent biographer of Tom Paine may be pardoned for his enthusiasm when he claims that "there is no doubt whatever that *Crisis I* won the Battle of Trenton."

It appears that the final council of war was held at General Nathanael Greene's quarters on the night of the 24th. Plans were completed for the concerted action of all units along the Delaware. General James Ewing with his army of 1,000 men, then occupying the position directly opposite Trenton, was to cross the river below the town on Christmas night so as to be

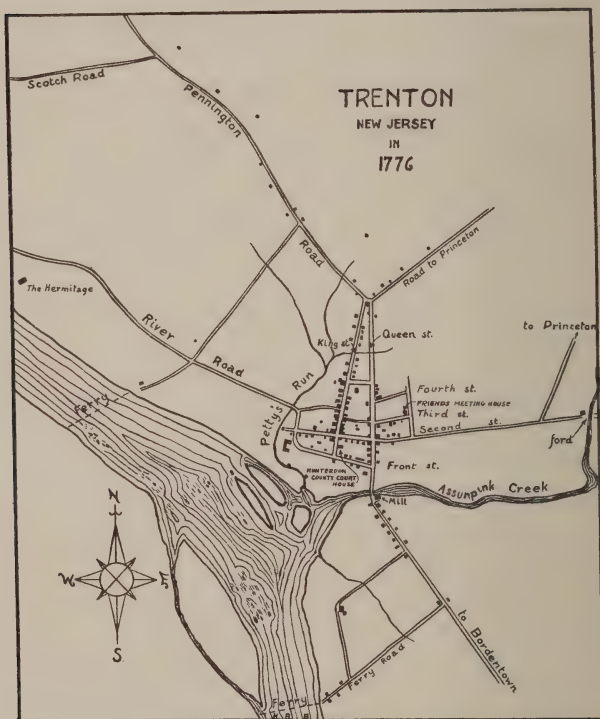
ready to attack from that side at dawn when the main army should begin the action from the north. Orders had already been sent to Colonels Reed and Cadwalader, who commanded 1,800 men at Bristol, to attack the enemy post at Bordentown at exactly the same time, and, if nothing more could be done, to make as great a diversion as possible.

The largest body of troops was to cross the river at a point nine miles above the town. They should then divide into two parts in order to approach their objective over separate roads. Major General Sullivan, who had been captured, in spite of gallant fighting, at the battle of Long Island and, on September 12, exchanged for Major General Richard Prescott, was designated to command the first division in which there would be three brigades of infantry and four companies of artillery. This division was to follow the River Road. The command of the four brigades and the artillery companies assigned to the second division, which was to march over the Scotch Road to the enemy outpost located on the Pennington Road, was given to Major General Greene.

Each of these military units was extremely depleted in numbers. By sickness, by the expiration of enlistments, by furloughs granted to prevent desertions, and by desertions the ranks had been thinned; the extent of the disintegration is not exactly known. The total strength of the whole expedition is, in this generation, within certain limits, problematical. The obscurity results not from any lack of what seems to be expert testimony on the point but rather from the existence of many records of witnesses well qualified to testify on the subject. The real total must have been approximately a quarter of those reported on the muster rolls on December 22; it amounted to nearly half of the number accepted by the Hessian court martial which had been instructed to determine this point particularly; it was less than half of the number which General Stirling told Lieutenant-Colonel Scheffer was the size of the army to which the latter was surrendering. The accepted total of those on the American side at the battle of Trenton, a figure on which the statements made in letters of Washington and Knox seem to agree, is 2,500 officers and men. There were

also sixteen field pieces divided equally between the two divisions.

The password selected for use during the expedition, "Victory or Death," was an expression of the real feelings of Washington.



CHAPTER II

THE ATTACK

“The good things which belong to prosperity are to be wished, but the good things that belong to adversity are to be admired.”

FRANCIS BACON, quoting Seneca

WHEN the time came to carry these arrangements into execution, the severity of the weather presented greater difficulties than had been expected. Because of the ice which came down the river in increasing quantities on that bitter night and the snow which changed to sleet about three o'clock in the morning, that part of the plan which anticipated the crossing of the army by midnight was not accomplished until 3 a.m. It was nearly four o'clock before the two divisions were formed and the march on Trenton was begun. Since it would not be possible to reach the town before dawn, Washington was apprehensive of discovery before the enemy outposts could be reached; nevertheless, he felt that it would be worse to turn back than to press on. This decision was

made quite without considering General Ewing's detachment and therefore it seems clear, although the records are silent on the subject, that Ewing's inability to get across the river was already known to him. The storm, which continued with sleet during the remainder of the night, probably made the surprise possible. Not one of the men, it is safe to say, trudging over the crusty roads with aching feet and chattering teeth, carrying a heavy gun with a wet flintlock, considered the weather a blessing.

The Commander-in-Chief went with the second division taking the longer route via the upper road. The rear guard of that part of the force, a place of special importance, was kept by the brigade of General Lord Stirling. He, as well as Sullivan, had a personal score to settle with the foe since they had captured him, also, at Long Island; a Britisher of equal rank, one Allan Macdonald, had been exchanged for him. When the van of this, the upper division, reached the outer picket, just after turning from the Scotch Road into the Pennington Road, the action began. The strategy of the attack was to chase the picket guards into town so fast that the

enemy would not have time to form before coming under fire. For this purpose the leading companies of each division had been selected for their intrepidity; they fulfilled the assignment with such vigor and success as to inspire those who followed them.

When Washington opened the action on the Pennington Road, Sullivan, with the hope of gaining the advantage of an exactly simultaneous attack, must have been waiting undiscovered on the River Road. In the meantime, he spread his men out in the woods on either side of the road just beyond the "Hermitage" where a guard of fifty fusiliers was stationed. At the moment of attack General Philemon Dickinson from his position on the Pennsylvania side of the river began shelling the River Road outpost in his own home. (The house is one of the six Colonial buildings standing in Trenton today.) As this picket company retreated into town one of their number was captured; on the Pennington Road there were two captured, two killed, and several wounded. Describing the scene to his wife Colonel Knox wrote:

About half a mile from the town was an advanced guard on each road consisting of a captain's guard.

These we forced and entered the town with them pell-mell; and here succeeded a scene of war of which I have often conceived, but never saw before. The hurry, fright, and confusion of the enemy was not unlike that which will be when the last trumpet shall sound.

In the town the Hessian commander, Colonel Johann Gottlieb Rall, since he had indulged himself freely on Christmas night, had not yet been aroused, on this bleak and dismal morning, when the shooting began. Hastily coming out of his quarters to take the direction of affairs, he was confounded to find that the picket on the Pennington Road was even then backing almost into him. "Push your cannon ahead" he commanded his artillery officer and sent two guns up King Street to check the attack while he surveyed the situation and prepared a plan of action. These field pieces opened fire just beyond the point where the brook crossed the street.

The Americans, by this time, were setting up six of their field guns about the point where King and Queen Streets joined Pennington Road, working under the eye of Washington who had reached his station on

the raised ground just north of this point in a position which then afforded a view of the whole area of action. As he sat upon his horse surveying the movements of friend and foe, he could see that General Hugh Mercer, on whom he had grown accustomed to place special dependence, was deploying his men on the right wing of the division occupying the meadow to the westward of Trenton. Behind the Commander-in-Chief the regiments of Colonels Hand, Scott, and Lawson of the brigades of Generals Stephen and de Fermoy scurried across the fields carrying out their orders to get possession of the road leading to Princeton and attempting to capture the strong outpost which they knew to be located on that road. But since the company of Hessians occupying this alarm post had heard the commotion on the Pennington Road, they were ready, at the appearance of a formidable number of foes, to retreat.

The picture before Washington at the high end of the town, where the two main streets came together in a narrow point almost at his feet, was done in cold gray. At intervals through the storm, he could see, at a dis-

tance of half a mile down Queen Street, the stone, humped-backed bridge over the Assunpink Creek. The road beyond the bridge ascended a short steep hill on the other bank and turned to the left between a score of houses. Over the intervening distance between him and the bridge, approximately seventy houses were scattered. The largest buildings and those that were most closely built were located on King Street in the middle distance. Except for this focal area there was considerable space between the houses. Outside the center three structures stood out, the Trenton Barracks at the extreme right, the stone mill on the far end of the bridge, and the Friends Meeting House to the left. The town on the west side was bounded by meadows extending to the river; to the eastward on higher ground orchards hedged the clearing.

Mindful of the disposition of his own forces, apprehensive of the movements of the enemy, Washington bestrode his horse alertly, taking in the static and the animated scene before him. Through the haze he could probably follow the progress of the first division on the River Road making its way into town.

At his right he had two brigades of Greene's division including that of Mercer, which was then in skirmish formation occupying the meadow, and that of Lord Stirling, the rear guard, which was waiting on the Pennington Road. At the left, behind him, the other two brigades were in possession of the road to Princeton (now Brunswick Avenue). All these were ready to charge into the enemy as soon as the artillery had done its work.

It was probably not possible to distinguish the enemy commander from this vantage point, but, had he been able to recognize his ranking opponent, Washington would have seen him in a state of consternation. At the beginning when Rall sent the first two cannon to hold off the attack, he was not aware of its dual character since he had not yet heard the firing on the River Road. When he did notice the commotion in that other quarter, he was dumfounded by the situation which was so different both in strategy and in spirit from anything he had planned to meet. He could only exclaim "What is it! What is it!" His plans for the defense of the post proved quite inadequate. The Americans did not help him by making mistakes.

On the contrary, the generalship on their side was excellent. Such steps were taken in all places as could scarcely be improved upon by "hindsight." With all the facts and records available for calm consideration, a better plan of action could not be devised.

This scene Washington surveyed without missing the critical conflict of the day, which was going on directly in front of him where the artillery commanded by Colonel Henry Knox—who was afterward the first Secretary of War—was beginning to fire. These batteries were under the command of Captain Thomas Forrest and Captain Alexander Hamilton—the latter was also to be in the first Cabinet as the Secretary of the Treasury. So devastating was the effect of the American onslaught that Rall had to order one of his regiments then forming on King Street near Second to advance to the support of the Hessian battery. Marching to this order they came under fire from Mercer's men and Rall felt it necessary to bring up the regiment falling in by the side of the English Church (St. Michael's) to this duty also. Two field pieces were sent to hold the Queen Street end of the line. But already

these infantrymen were in difficulties, unable to depend on their muskets in the wet weather. Only two straggling volleys were fired by these two regiments before they made a general retreat without orders. As the enemy infantry broke Captain William Washington led his company in capturing the first two enemy guns. In this assault he was wounded in each hand and his lieutenant, James Monroe—afterward President—received a wound in the shoulder.

At about this time some activity was to be noticed in two other places from the position of the commanding general. The third regiment of the enemy had formed at Second and Queen Streets, and not far from them, at the Friends Meeting House, the British light cavalry company were saddling up their horses.

Meanwhile the retreating Hessians filtered through between the houses and most of them, but not all, went in disorder to a field east of town where they formed in orderly ranks once more. The Hessian field pieces on Queen Street continued to fire for a few rounds but the concentration of the American fire on them made them abandon the posi-

tion rather than lose two more guns. Seeing the movement to the field beyond the houses Washington ordered the two brigades on his left to stretch their line over to the creek in order to cut off the enemy's flight and brought the rear guard up in front of him. All the while on the right wing of the battle line, Mercer was occupying the buildings of the town from which his men fired their muskets effectively without getting the powder wet.

When Rall led the two re-formed regiments back into town, as he did after learning that the bridge over the Assunpink was closed to him, he was shot down on Queen Street opposite Fourth (Broad and Academy Streets today). Stirling charged down on them from the head of the street while Knox advanced the positions of his guns. At the loss of their leader the two Hessian regiments fell back again to the eastward in actual flight this time, expecting to be able to escape to Princeton. In the meantime, however, Stevens and de Fermoy had closed in, blocking the way of the fugitives. Baffled by this maneuver they took refuge in an orchard, but the position proved hopeless almost before it was reached and the more

so since the field pieces, which had followed Stirling's advance, were ready to go into action again. Lieutenant-Colonel Scheffer, on whom the command had devolved, was willing to talk—and to give up his sword to Lord Stirling.

Probably it could be seen from the observation post of the Commander-in-Chief that the capture had not been made independently of Sullivan's division. Without the completion of his assignment to get possession of the bridge over the Assunpink Creek, Rall would probably have led all of the Hessians over the bridge and fought an engagement that might have been similar to the second battle of Trenton which was to take place at this bridge on the following Thursday between Washington and Lord Cornwallis. As the first division had made its way along the River Road, the only opposition had come from the fifty musketeers dislodged from the picket post at the "Hermitage" until a few men from the Trenton Barracks joined them. Here where the River Road turned into town, they had faced about and opened fire; only one volley could be got

off, for "the Americans were thick in their front." Making for the bridge on the run they escaped to Bordentown. The guard at the bridge, a sergeant and eighteen men, after witnessing the flight of twenty British cavalrymen, who had been quartered in the Friends Meeting House, some stragglers, and the picket guard from the River Road, fled before the assault. Sullivan, expecting to have to fight for the bridge, was in the lead with Colonel John Glover's men of Marblehead, Massachusetts, who had done yeoman service in the work of ferrying the army across the Delaware. But, as Washington could see from his commanding position, the bridge was taken without a fight.

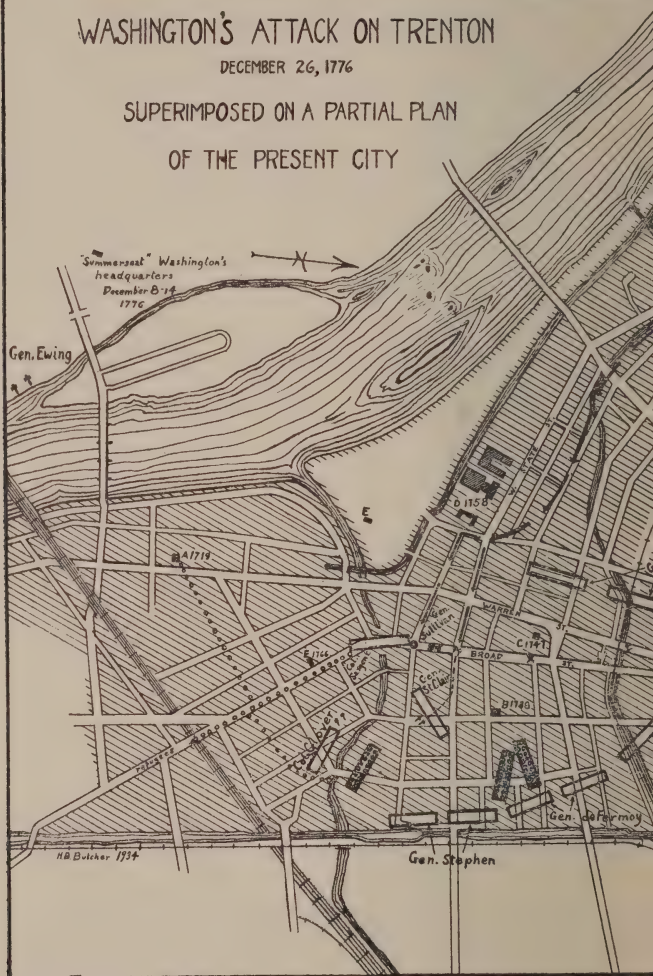
Meanwhile, in the rear of Sullivan's division, the brigade of General St. Clair turned the corner at Second Street and, with the dauntless Colonel John Stark's New Hampshire men in the lead, charged into the heart of the town. Captain Moulder with his two field guns supported the onset. The Hessian regiment, waiting in ranks at Second and Queen Streets, had, up to this time, taken no part in the fighting. Rall was saving it for

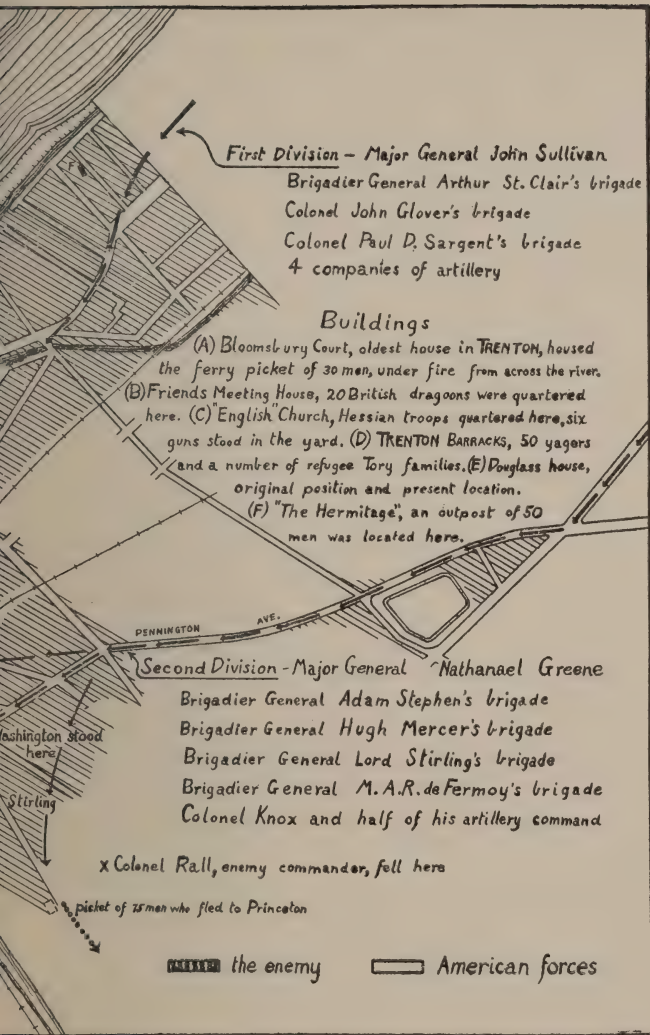
Gen. P. Dickinson

WASHINGTON'S ATTACK ON TRENTON

DECEMBER 26, 1776

SUPERIMPOSED ON A PARTIAL PLAN
OF THE PRESENT CITY





the battle after the preliminary move to stop the "Provincials" had ended. But the vigor and determination of the oncoming attack throttled his first attempt to cope with his adversaries; he never had a chance to do anything further. And so it happened that these proud European soldiers, left standing without orders for at least fifteen minutes, were engaged by Colonel Stark and driven back past the (First) Presbyterian Church and into an orchard on the other side of the road. During the action Moulder's men gained a firing position on the street intersection where the enemy had formed. (The location is now the center of the city, the junction of State and Broad Streets.)

As the fighting receded from the vicinity of the bridge, Sullivan moved one of his units under Colonel Glover to the high ground south of the creek and to a point above the mill pond in order to prevent the escape of those who were fording the stream. These fugitives came from the regiment in the orchard close to the bank of the creek. They, having learned of the surrender of the other two regiments and having found es-

cape through the woods obstructed, tried to get across the Assunpink. About fifty of them did make their escape through this stream. But as soon as Colonel Glover got his men to the new position all possibility of flight was cut off. The rest surrendered.



CHAPTER III

THE NEWS

“When the hurlyburly’s done,
When the battle’s lost and won.”

SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*

THE first report of the victory to reach Philadelphia was written at Bristol by Colonel John Cadwalader just before noon of that day and directed to the Council of Safety. The news was tantalizingly scanty, but, however meagre, it brought relief to the threatened city. He wrote:

I this moment have an account by Mr. McLane that he was at Trenton Ferry this morning & heard a very heavy firing on the River & Penny Town Roads, that lead to Trenton. The heavy firing lasted $\frac{1}{4}$ an hour & continued to moderate for about $\frac{3}{4}$. The Light Horse & Hessians were seen flying in great confusion towards Bordentown, but without cannon or wagons so that the enemy must have lost the whole, a party of our men intercepted about a dozen Hessians in sight of our people on this side & brought them to the ferry & huzza’d. I have ordered boats from Dunk’s [ferry], and shall pass as soon as possible. We can muster here about 1800

men if the expedition last night in the storm does not thin our ranks. Has Gen. Putnam crossed and with what numbers?—pray, let me know. Everything of this kind gives confidence to the troops.

On the following day a report of the engagement was sent to the Continental Congress in Baltimore. It was transmitted to Robert Morris in Philadelphia for him to read en route. One finds in the following report Washington's estimate of the victory, officially made:

TO THE PRESIDENT OF CONGRESS:

Sir: I have the pleasure of congratulating you upon the success of an enterprise which I had formed against a detachment of the enemy lying in Trenton, and which was executed yesterday morning.

The evening of the 25th I ordered the troops intended for this service to parade back of McKonkey's Ferry, that they might begin to pass as soon as it grew dark, imagining we should be able to throw them all over, with the necessary artillery, by twelve o'clock, and that we might easily arrive at Trenton by five in the morning, the distance being about nine miles. But the quantity of ice, made that night, impeded the passage of the boats so much, that it was three o'clock before the artillery could all be got over: and near four before the troops took up their line of march. This made me despair of surprising the town, as I well knew we could not reach it before the day was fairly broke. But as I was certain there was no making a retreat without

being discovered and harassed on repassing the river, I determined to push on at all events. I formed my detachment into two divisions, one to march by the lower or river road, the other by the upper or Pennington road. As the divisions had nearly the same distance to march, I ordered each of them, immediately upon forcing the out-guards, to push directly into the town, that they might charge the enemy before they had time to form.

The upper division arrived at the enemy's advanced post exactly at eight o'clock; and in three minutes after, I found, from the fire on the lower road, that that division had also got up. The out-guards made but small opposition, though, for their numbers, they behaved very well, keeping up a constant retreating fire from behind houses. We presently saw their main body formed; but, from their motions, they seemed undetermined how to act. Being hard pressed by our troops, who had already got possession of part of their artillery, they attempted to file off by a road on their right leading to Princetown; but, perceiving their intention, I threw a body of troops in their way which immediately checked them. Finding from our disposition that they were surrounded and that they must inevitably be cut to pieces if they made any further resistance, they agreed to lay down their arms. The number that submitted in this manner was twenty-three officers and eight hundred and eighty-six men. Colonel Rall, the commanding officer, and seven others were found wounded in the town. I don't exactly know how many they had killed; but I fancy not above twenty or thirty, as they never made any

regular stand. Our loss is very trifling indeed, only two officers and one or two privates wounded.

I find that the detachment of the enemy consisted of three Hessian regiments of Anspach, Kniphausen, and Rohl, amounting to about fifteen hundred men, and a troop of British light-horse; but, immediately upon the beginning of the attack, all those, who were not killed or taken, pushed directly down the road towards Bordentown. These would likewise have fallen into our hands, could my plan have been completely carried into execution. General Ewing was to have crossed before day at Trenton Ferry, and taken possession of the bridge leading out of town; but the quantity of ice was so great that, though he did everything in his power to effect it, he could not get over. This difficulty also hindered General Cadwalader from crossing with the Pennsylvania militia from Bristol. He got part of his foot over; but, finding it impossible to embark his artillery, he was obliged to desist. I am fully confident that, could the troops under Generals Ewing and Cadwalader have passed the river, I should have been able with their assistance to have driven the enemy from all their posts below Trenton. But the numbers I had with me being inferior to theirs below me, and a strong battalion of light infantry being at Princetown above me, I thought it most prudent to return the same evening with the prisoners and artillery we had taken. We found no stores of any consequence in the town.

In justice to the officers and men, I must add that their behavior upon this occasion reflects the highest honor upon them. The difficulty of passing the river in a very severe night, and their march

through a violent storm of snow and hail, did not in the least abate their ardor; but, when they came to the charge, each seemed to vie with the other in pressing forward, and were I to give preference to any particular corps, I should do great injustice to the others.

Colonel Baylor, my first aide-de-camp, will have the honor of delivering this to you; and from him you may be made acquainted with many other particulars. His spirited behavior upon every occasion requires me to recommend him to your particular notice.

I have the honor to be, with great respect,
sir, your most obedient servant,

GO. WASHINGTON

The committee of Congress left in Philadelphia, upon the adjournment of that body to Baltimore, wrote immediately to General Washington advising him not to exchange his prisoners. They said:

We think their capture affords a favorable opportunity of making them acquainted with the situation and circumstances of many of their countrymen who came here without a farthing of property and have, by care and industry, acquired plentiful fortunes which they have enjoyed in perfect peace and tranquillity until these invaders have thought proper to disturb and destroy those possessions. It will be proper to separate the officers from the men and to canton the latter in the back counties.

That policy was followed with the success expected.

Trentonian readers will permit a digression here for the purpose of observing that one of the three men who made this recommendation, George Clymer, lies buried in an unostentatious grave in the Friends Meeting House yard at Hanover and Montgomery Streets in Trenton. Robert Morris and George Walton were the other two members of the committee. Clymer, it might also be recalled, helped to make the Constitution of the United States. His house, "Summerseat," in Morrisville is still standing.

According to the military records Colonel Rall's command was made up of 1,475 officers and men including the British light horsemen and the company guarding the drawbridge at Crosswicks, eight miles or more from Trenton. Twelve officers avoided capture; approximately seventy men escaped to Princeton and 292 to Bordentown; twenty-five is the probable number of those killed defending the post. That leaves more than three score unaccounted for, since the report of those captured was raised ultimately to one thousand. The

missing, undoubtedly, were from among those who escaped. To these fleeing Hessians the chance to seek land in the virgin country of Pennsylvania among people who spoke their language presented itself. Opportunities in America had been the main theme of their letters to Germany. Certainly they can not be blamed for deserting a cause which was not theirs. That this is probably what they did may be adduced from the fact that about 5,000, of the 29,867 German mercenaries who served in America, did desert. Seeing that these soldiers were paid for as so many bushels of potatoes, the records exist which show that only 17,313 of the total number landed in this country were transported back to Europe. It is a curious fact that some of the Hessian soldiers were drawn by offers of bounties in land to desert and to enlist on the American side.

Two of those who fled from the battle of Trenton, with the evident intention of making a journey into the back country, were caught by a farmer who lived a few miles from Trenton. One morning before dawn, a day or two after the battle, the farmer's boy discovered two Hessian soldiers among the

horses in the stable. Armed with a pitch fork and determination the farmer commanded them to yield themselves prisoners. One tried to get away while the other was being bound but he was caught by the dog and turned over to the army with his companion.

Besides the prisoners, six brass three-pounders, three ammunition wagons, a thousand pieces of small arms, and a number of horses fell into the hands of the victors. The regiments captured felt most keenly the loss of their flags of which there were four, without counting the company banners. Even after the end of the war when the units had returned to Germany, they were not immediately permitted to replace these standards.

A final summary of casualties on the American side must include the fact that two privates were killed in the action.

After the battle Washington returned to Pennsylvania, taking the prisoners with him and going by the same route over which he had come, by Johnson's Ferry. (Dr. Carlos E. Godfrey recently demonstrated that only the Pennsylvania landing was called "McKonkey's Ferry.") And so, almost as soon as it

was taken, the town was evacuated. This move was decided upon at a conference of the chief officers who, taking into consideration the records of history which show that the fruits of military victory have often been lost by the failure of the general to take full advantage of his success, nevertheless decided that, since the enemy was present in force twelve miles above them at Princeton and ten miles below them at Bordentown, the army, after the rigors of the severe night, not to mention the strain of battle, needed the security from attack that the river afforded. Had the withdrawal not been made, the strategic advantage of position and numbers would have given the enemy a chance to recover all that had been lost and to do much more. But Washington was not to be caught, and so, long after dark on Thursday night, December 26, 1776, the last company of tired soldiers reached their quarters in Pennsylvania.

For years a Hessian court martial examined into the "disaster" under instructions to fix the blame for it. The records of this court in the archives at Marburg, Germany, were discovered by the late President of the

Trenton Battle Monument Association,
General William S. Stryker. As the result of
his enterprising research, the details of the
battle have been brought to light. In the con-
clusions of the court there is the following
sentence with which this account closes:
“We observe from the testimony that the
surprise at Trenton was executed with great
force and determination by the enemy.”

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The battle of Trenton, including its

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